

How an ancient tradition shaped a nation's work ethic

Is this the secret training that gives this country a competitive edge?



It's the day before *National Day* and people across Norway are working hard to make the whole country look clean and tidy ahead of the celebrations on May 17. In a school playground in the small town of Sogndal, lots of parents have turned up to get the area ready.

Six mothers are directing operations. A young father and another parent who is an Eritrean refugee are carrying chairs and tables out. Another group are using birch tree branches and flags to make the space look festive, while others are putting out rubbish bins. A few are asking about the games they need to run the next day for the children.

"Do your best, that's good enough," the organisers tell them.

Dugnad is a crucial resource for sports teams and, because it's meant to be social, fun and voluntary, is seen as strengthening the team community.

This is "*dugnad*", a word which literally means help or support in Norwegian, a custom of communal work in Norway that dates back centuries, and one that has existed in some form or another in most agricultural societies around the world.

In Norway, *dugnad* was traditionally a way of getting big tasks like roofing, haymaking and house-building done, usually followed by a big meal or a feast. In a nation of farmers and fishermen, it functioned as a kind of community insurance scheme. People helped others out and as a result knew that they could always call on the community in their time of need.

Today *dugnad* has come to mean unpaid voluntary work done in a group, for local, national or international causes. And it's become so entrenched in contemporary Norway that in 2004 *dugnad* was voted Norway's word of the year.



After the hard work of *dugnad* Norway's National Day on May 17 includes many parades and parties (Credit: Oddrun Midtbo)

"Last week I had four different *dugnads*, because of my kids' football teams. Next week we're going to have a garden *dugnad* at work," says Hanne Hoff, who is one of the organisers.

She has no problem with working for free.

"It brings us parents closer, and it's a good feeling that we can do something together for our kids."

In urban areas, *dugnad* is generally associated with outdoor spring cleaning and gardening in housing co-operatives. *Dugnads* are also common in nursery and primary schools to complete various types of maintenance.

While in rural areas, neighbours also sometimes help fix up each other's houses or garages. When it comes to sport, however, almost every parent in the country puts in an appearance to support their children's activities.

These sport-related *dugnads* can help small teams save on expenses that members might otherwise have to cover themselves, such as transport, half-time drinks or officials like referees and pitch-side first-aiders. This means *dugnad* has become a crucial resource for sports teams and, because it's meant to be social, fun and voluntary, is seen as strengthening the team community.

And this doesn't have to be small scale. Norway may only have around 5.3 million inhabitants but Norwegians take great pride in setting world records – and harnessing the spirit of *dugnad* has been integral to both the world's largest youth football tournament and the world's largest charity telethon.

"The most important thing is to get Norwegians engaged, working together for a cause bigger than themselves."

The football tournament attracts youth teams from all over the world. Participants say that it's impossible to tell which job or income bracket the volunteers involved come from. Whether a bus driver or a CEO in a big company, for almost a week everyone dresses the same, carries bags for their team, cheers the kids on and sleeps on mattresses on school floors.



The roots of *dugnad* can be traced back to Norway's fishing and farming communities
(Credit: Getty Images)

The national telethon which raises money for charity also relies on the *dugnad* spirit. Every year, on a Sunday in October, 100,000 Norwegians knock on 2.3 million doors to shake a bucket for a charitable cause. In 2018 it's about tackling loneliness across all sections of society.

"Dugnad makes you feel like a good person, and it makes the world a better place," Vibecke Ostby, head of the telethon, says. "Of course the amount of money collected is important, but the most important thing is to get Norwegians engaged, working together for a cause bigger than themselves."

Informal and flat structures have long characterised Norwegian working life which some attribute directly to the legacy of years of *dugnad*: an intentional lack of hierarchy which can leave foreigners struggling to work out who is an ordinary employee and who is a boss at a Norwegian firm.

Surveys show that the number of volunteers in Norway and the amount of time they spend volunteering are high and increasing in some areas. A total of 61% volunteered for at least one organisation in 2014, figures from *Statistics Norway*¹ show.

Dugnad is also a significant economic contributor. The value of voluntary work in Norway's non-governmental organisations (NGO) sector, for example, is estimated at just under £6.5bn (\$8.8bn) – more than the £4.8bn of paid work in the sector - around 5% of GDP for mainland Norway in 2014².



Oslo's population rose at record rates during the early 2000s, making it the fastest growing major city in Europe at the time (Credit: Getty Images)

Research professor Karl Henrik Sivesind, of the *Institute for Social Research* in Oslo, has been studying *dugnad* for almost two decades. He says higher earners and the better educated are generally more involved.

*"It is a paradox that people not active in the labour market, who would have the most to gain by joining *dugnad*, contribute the least," he says.*

He says *dugnad* is a good opportunity for new people to make connections in the community such as refugees, immigrants and also unemployed people or people without an established social network. He says that while the main reason for taking part in a *dugnad* is to contribute to a good cause, doing so also boosts self-esteem and can even help develop new skills or connections useful for the job market.

*"I remember the first time I was asked to contribute. I didn't know what *dugnad* really was, but I answered yes right away; I was so happy to be asked," said Yvonne Nshimirimana from Burundi, a mother-of-two who came to Norway as a refugee 11 years ago.*

Taking part has helped her make new friends and become an active member of the village community. For *National Day* she has to make three chocolate cakes. A small school in a small community means more *dugnad* responsibilities for everybody.

Tsegay Alem Gebretsadk, the Eritrean father, says he wants to meet his social obligations in his new home.

"Of course, I want to support my kids and do what I'm expected to do. We do help each other in Eritrea too, but usually more with family and neighbours," he says.

One of the other parents, Gjoril Lerheim-Barsnes, says social media has helped make organising *dugnads* easier.

*"No one can say they didn't get the messages any more, or that their kid lost the piece of paper about the *dugnad*," she adds.*

¹ <https://www.ssb.no/>

² <https://www.statsbudsjettet.no/Statsbudsjettet-2018/English/>

Dr Sivesind says most people want to take part – and for those who don't, life in small communities in particular can be a little uncomfortable.

"If you don't attend, you know you will meet the same people at the stores, at school, at work or other activities," he says. "You know you better meet up and do your share of work for your kids or community, otherwise you risk being labelled lazy and uncaring."

Late the next day, *National Day* celebrations in the playground are over and the *dugnad* crew sweep into action. Within an hour everything is back to normal. The decorations are down, the rubbish has been picked up and the tables and chairs are back inside.

The parents are happy – everything went well, the weather was good and the ice cream sales soared. The money will help pay for the school trip next year, so all the kids can go.

"All the parents came; often both parents even if they were only asked to send one. It's always a good feeling after a dugnad," smiles Lerheim-Barsnes.